



PRESIDENTIAL MESSAGE TO THE PASTORS OF THE APOSTOLIC ASSEMBLY

NOVEMBER 23, 2023 | ANAHEIM, CALIFORNIA

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GENERAL PASTOR, AAFCJ**

**BUILD THE CHURCH:
MISSION**
MATTHEW 16:18

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November 23, 2023 | Anaheim, California

Bishop Felipe A. Salazar

General Pastor, AAFCJ

Dear Presidents, Bishops, Regional Supervisors, and Pastors of the Apostolic Assembly,

Praise the Lord.

It gives me great pleasure to address you on this occasion one year after the beginning of our administration. After a year of serving as President, I feel grateful for the opportunity to serve the Apostolic Assembly Pastors and the partnership I have found in the men who serve with me on the General Board.

This Convention marks the first year of our administration. Truly, God has been good to us. Throughout this year, it has been a joy to see a renewed interest in the church's mission and a growing enthusiasm among the Pastors regarding its vision. Looking back, I can say that I am grateful for what the Lord is doing and for the progress that our church is making. Looking forward, I see blessings, and I know there is still much work to do to finally see the growth we believe God will give us. We are at the beginning of what I believe will be known as a great **"Apostolic Growth Movement."**

More than ever, at local churches, District Pastors meetings, Episcopal and Joint Bishops Meetings, I've heard the leadership of our church talking about what is most important to the heart of God, "the Mission." The conversations I'm hearing with greater frequency are about evangelistic cycles, friends' days, water baptisms, and making disciples. In these conversations, I feel like the Prophet Elijah, who came to King Ahab after three and a half years of a challenging drought and declared, **"Get thee up, eat and drink; for there is a sound of abundance of rain."**¹ This was a declaration that the drought had come to an end. Something extraordinary was about to happen. The land would soon feel the reviving drops of rain fall upon its parched land, which would ultimately result in a bountiful harvest. That is exactly the feeling in my soul.

The purpose that I have for this message is threefold. First, it is to clarify our present situation; secondly, I want to explain the vision; and finally, I will establish a path forward. The Mission is what is driving our administration. My hope is that it will serve to move our institution further along toward a brighter future.

The Apostolic Assembly is a church on a mission. In the year 2007, President Sanchez's administration gave the Apostolic Assembly its Mission Statement. It stated that the Mission of the Apostolic Assembly was to **"Exalt Christ, Equip the Church, and Evangelize the**

1. 1 Kings 18.14

World.” That statement has directed our church for many years. The Apostolic Assembly is also a church with a vision. At the beginning of our administration, I asked the Lord about a vision statement. What He gave me was a picture of what the church should be ideally. Here is what I see. I see the Apostolic Assembly as a **Healthy, Growing, Spirit-filled, Apostolic Cellular Church**. I arrived at this statement in prayer and meditation. The question on my heart was: what must the Apostolic Assembly look like ideally? What should every local church in the Apostolic Assembly be like? What should characterize our local churches? The words that flowed into my mind were that our churches must be Apostolic. They must be cellular. They need to be healthy and growing, and above all, they must be Spirit-filled. When I finally began writing the vision statement, I realized this was nothing new. It’s been the consistent cry of every leader of our church since the beginning of our organization. Evident in the plans presented by our past Presidents to the Pastoral Body and in the messages they gave were these truths: we are Apostolic; we are Pentecostal; we are the true Church. Adjacent to these truth declarations was the vision for a healthy and growing church. The vision God gave me was the same one He gave to all of our past Presidents.

Former Presidents Baldemar Rodriguez, Manuel Viscarra, Daniel Sanchez, Samuel Valverde, and John Fortino, as well as all of the earlier Presidents of our Assembly, used their Presidential pulpits to call the membership of our Assembly to BUILD THE CHURCH and spread the Apostolic message so that Christ’s name would be glorified. They did this while confronting the challenges that inevitably come with leading a large organization and managing the problems that, at times, threaten the purposes they envisioned. Despite the challenges, they continued working to BUILD THE CHURCH with the hope that we might see God’s vision for His church become a reality. Along the way, they had victories and setbacks. But despite the adversities, the promise still rang true, **“the Lord plans to prosper you, and not to harm you; plans to give you a hope and a future.”**²

Throughout the past year, I have reiterated this vision statement to the Pastors of our churches as often as I could because this statement concisely expresses how I see our church. This statement is not only a vision statement but is also a statement about our identity. It describes who we are and, in another sense, who we are to fully become. A vision is composed of two components: first, a clear vision of our hopes and dreams, and second, it defines the instrument that will get us there. This vision statement paints a picture of our destiny. It’s the target we are aiming at.

That is not to say there are not areas we have to work on. There are areas that need bolstering. For example, although we are making noteworthy progress, we are still in the early stages of becoming a cellular church. The Strategy of Jesus, which has been gaining wider acceptance in our Assembly, still has much ground to gain. A significant number of Pastors are still undecided and are not fully committed to the vision. It is my hope that the vision will be fully embraced in the coming years. As for our administration, we will work

2. Jeremiah 29.11, KJV

to see its full acceptance become a reality. Another area that needs our attention is church growth. It is our desire to be a growing church. Someone might ask, "Why is paying attention to the size of our organization important?" Let me give you five reasons:

- 1) The size of our church speaks of our effectiveness in carrying out our Mission.
- 2) Jesus said His church would grow.
- 3) The primitive Apostolic Church grew greatly in the first century.
Growth is in the DNA of healthy churches.
- 4) Growing churches are the only way to reach the world with the Apostolic message.
- 5) One day, God will call the Pastors of our churches to give an account of what we did to reach the world for Christ.

OUR PAST

In an Article by John P. Kotter entitled, "Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail," Mr. Kotter poses that in order for a corporation to embrace change, it must first be made aware of the urgency for change. He states, "When the urgency rate is not . . . enough, the transformation process cannot proceed, and the long-term future of the organization is put in jeopardy."³ What he is saying is that significant change needs a weighty motivator for change. While Mr. Kotter's comments are directed towards corporate America, where the bottom line is money, yet the urgency for us is that our work has to do with the salvation of men. There is an eternal significance to our work.

The numbers I am going to present are a reality and should highlight our need for change. They should serve as a wake-up call to all of the Pastors of our churches. Let me start with a disclosure. Because we are missing the records to report with greater precision, the statistics I will report are generally accurate but not altogether precise. They will not give us the details of the highs and lows of the growth of the Apostolic Assembly. But they will provide us with an accurate picture of our average overall growth over a 91-year span of our history.

In this report, I am not including the growth of our church in the International Missions fields. That report will be given at the General Convention of 2024. In this report, I will be assuming that in 1930, when our church was incorporated, we only had about one thousand members. That is a modest approximation. I have arrived at this inference because, at the time, the Apostolic Assembly already had various local congregations. In the book entitled, 50 Aniversario de Historia de la Asamblea Apostólica de la Fe en Cristo Jesús, the authors report that in 1925, prior to its incorporation in 1930, when the Apostolic Assembly celebrated its first Convention, we already had at least 18 Pastors, 6 evangelist pastors, and 10 deacons.⁴ By then, the church was already semi-organized and had several con-

3. HBR's 10 Must Reads on Change Management, Harvard Business Review Press, Boston Massachusetts, 2011

4. 50 Aniversario de Historia de la Asamblea Apostólica de la Fe en Cristo Jesús, pp. 13-182011

gregations. Apostolic historian Abraham Ruiz, on this question, wrote me indicating that from some historical photos and records, we can safely deduce that in 1930, the membership of the Assembly may well have been around 2,500. ⁵

Nonetheless, to estimate our church's growth, I will conservatively assume that our membership was one thousand or more members in 1930. I will use the number 1,000. From that number, I jumped to the year 2021 (91 years later). The census of 2021 counted 76,962 total Apostolic members in the United States of America. What we end up with is an average growth rate of 4.89% per year nationally. That is where we stand today.

Typically, churches experience gains and losses. Over the years, we have had plentiful harvests, as well as years when our losses surpassed our gains. Overall, our losses have been significant enough to slow our overall growth pattern considerably. This general mathematical calculation does not mean that there are no local congregations that have grown significantly. There has been. There are churches that have grown healthily beyond the national norm. Others have grown substantially. These churches have set an example of what is possible and serve to challenge the rest of us to believe God for a greater harvest. As an organization, we have incorporated new policies, implemented new strategies, and even attempted to change our Constitution in a sincere effort to BUILD THE CHURCH.

THE PRESENT

God's plans for our present are to bless us. His plans are for our church to prosper. This has been true of God's people throughout the ages. God, regardless of the circumstances, has always had a plan to bless His people, even when His people found themselves in distress. During the ministry of Jeremiah, the Lord said to the people of Judah, ***'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.*** ⁶ This has always been God's intention for his people. We know this because of three unwavering truths: First, God is good. Second, He loves his people; third, He is always willing to forgive them when they humble themselves. His plans for His people are always consistent with these three truths.

The context of Jeremiah's prophecy is amazing. It highlights God's unwavering love and commitment to His people, Judah, who had just experienced a great national defeat. In the year 586 BC, the Babylonians crushed Jerusalem. The people to whom Jeremiah wrote were the remnant that had been left behind in Jerusalem. Still fresh in the minds of the people was the decimation of their families, friends, and the destruction of their beloved city.

In this context, the prophet revealed God's gracious intention for His people. In seventy years, the captivity would end, and they would see the restoration of their beloved city. Despite the people's failure, God had a vision for the city and a plan for his people. While waiting for the coming restoration, God laid out the conditions for their restoration. They

5. Interview, November 08, 2023.

6. Jeremiah 29.11, KJV

were to, "Build ye houses, and dwell in them; and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them; Take ye wives, and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; that ye may be increased there, and not diminished. And seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the Lord for it: for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace." ⁷ These were the words of the prophet.

Incredibly, by God's instructions, the people were to live in peace in the land of their captivity. In obedience to this prophecy, Nehemiah would eventually rise within the Chaldean culture and 70 years later, to the position and prominence required for Cyrus to authorize them to return to Jerusalem and rebuild. God had a vision for Judah. His vision was that Judah would grow and prosper in Babylon and then prosper in Jerusalem. God's plans to prosper His people never fail, as the Book of Nehemiah shows us. God has a plan to prosper the Apostolic Assembly.

THE FUTURE

As most Pastors know, we have set a growth track of seven percent per year. At the District Conventions this year, we explained to the Pastoral Body that if the Pastors sustain a 7% growth track, then their local churches will double their membership in 10 years. The point is not just to grow the membership of our churches, but it's winning the lost for Christ. That means that every Pastor must become an expert in evangelism, discipleship, and working in small groups.

Given our reality, our administration has proposed the following measures:

1). We Propose that the leadership of the Apostolic Assembly focus on the Mission.

This was Jesus' intent when He, for 40 days, exhorted His disciples on their future work in light of His glorification. This was also the focus of the early Apostolic leadership in the Book of Acts. Peripheral activities like holding services, social events, great music and efficient administration, and even spiritual giftedness, do find their significance in the mission. We are attempting to focus the leadership by asking all of the local churches to submit simple reports.

2). We Propose that we put the Strategy of Jesus at the center of our missional efforts.

The Strategy of Jesus has been the system that our church has been promoting and supporting since November 2007. It has established structures for bringing people to Christ and forming disciples. Discipleship is the key to retention. We need a strong commitment to our Strategy.

3). We Propose that we establish a minimum 7% annual growth rate for our churches.

Given the statistics of our growth over the last 93 years, we have set a higher minimum annual growth rate for our church at 7%. A 7% growth rate refers to the actual growth rate of the local church. In order for the church to grow at 7%, it must baptize and retain the people it evangelizes. That means putting a strong emphasis on discipleship.

7. Jeremiah 29.5-7 KJV

4). We Propose that the job descriptions of the leaders at the different levels of our church be adjusted to accommodate the Mission.

We have proposed slight modifications to the job descriptions of the officials at the National, District, Sector, and Local levels. The reasons for the slight modifications are that we want symmetry between the officials' job descriptions and the church's Mission. Leaders need to know the changes we are asking of them so that they are lined up with the Mission and vision.

5). We Propose that every District set new church plant goals per year. We are asking for District leaders to set goals for planting churches. We believe that church planting is a major component of church growth. A Pastor with a vision for planting new churches is a Pastor who will motivate and inspire a new generation of young Evangelists and future Pastors. If they are given a vision for their future, these young preachers will eagerly sacrifice to BUILD THE CHURCH and their ministries in the Apostolic Assembly. We aim to break the glass ceiling of 1000 local church congregations by 2026.

6). We Propose that the Pastors of our church organize their churches around the Mission.

The Ministers of our local churches must serve as the leaders of the major evangelistic and discipling systems of the church. The Pastor and the leadership of the church are responsible for more than organizing activities and church calendars. We, the Pastors, are responsible for organizing the church in such a way that it becomes an efficient evangelizing and discipling machine. We, the District and General Board, are responsible for supporting that work. Local churches win souls and disciple believers. That is our work.

7). We Propose that we depend on the Holy Ghost for a harvest of souls.

Nothing of significance will happen without the direction and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. This is why Jesus was so emphatic with His disciples about receiving the baptism of the Holy Ghost before they went out to fulfill the Mission. The Holy Ghost is key to the growth of the church because the Holy Ghost is the presence of Christ in the Church. Jesus Himself said, "I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing."⁸ Our effectiveness in accomplishing the Mission is directly proportional to our dependence on the Holy Ghost.

THREE ADDITIONAL CHANGES

1. WE MUST BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT CULTIVATING THE RIGHT CULTURE IN OUR LOCAL CHURCHES

The culture of our local churches must support the Mission. A healthy church culture is essential for the Mission to advance and thrive. The Book of Acts goes to great lengths to describe the culture that sustained the advancement of the church in the Apostolic era.

8. John 15.5 KJV

Acts chapter two describes it. "And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. 43 And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. 44 And all that believed were together, and had all things common; 45 And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. 46 And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, 47 Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." ⁹

Culture was the focus in the answer Jesus gave the scribe who asked what was the greatest of all the commandments. His answer defined the values that buttressed the culture of the church. "And Jesus answered him, the first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: 30 And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. 31 And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these." ¹⁰

The admirable culture of the primitive Apostolic Church was based on their commitment to loving God and loving people. Everything the Apostolic Church did emanated from those two fundamental values. Unity, generosity, spirituality, joy, and worship all came from the things they most treasured: God and People. That culture resulted in the early church to have, "favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." ¹¹

At the Joint Bishops Meeting this past September, Bishop Misael Gurrola gave a conference entitled, "Leading Across". In that conference, addressing the concern of some Pastors that the Strategy of Jesus did not produce the results they expected, he said, "If we have a clear mission and a clear vision and we are still not getting the expected results, then we must look at our culture." Culture, he explained, is an important factor that must be examined when a church's mission and vision are clear and still we are not getting the expected results.

Summarizing his viewpoint on the significance of organizational culture over strategy, Peter Drucker states, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast every day." A culture of genuine love and acceptance will draw the hurting and lost to Christ and the local church and keep them in the fold.

2. EVERY UPPER LEVEL OF OUR ORGANIZATION MUST FOCUS ON MAKING OUR LOCAL CHURCHES SUCCESSFUL.

The Local church is the key. The upper levels of our organization (National, District, and Sector) must be oriented to serve the local church. Everything of significance happens there. It is there that the gospel is preached, people are evangelized, people are disciples, new believers are baptized, believers find community, couples get married and serve. Think

9. Acts 2:42-47 KJV| 10. Mark 12:29-31| 11. Acts 2:47 KJV

about anything of significance that has occurred in your spiritual life, and the probability is that it happened in the context of the local church and its ministries. Bill Hybels stated, "Nothing on earth has greater potential to change lives and carry out His Kingdom's work in our communities than the local church. There's nothing like the local church when it's working right. Its beauty is indescribable. Its power is breathtaking. Its potential is unlimited."¹²

If that is true, and it is, then we must give our attention to making sure that our local churches are successful. We must help the Pastor whose hands are weary. We must awaken the slumbering leader, we must lead and inspire the successful leader to believe God for even greater victories and then encourage them to pull other Pastors up with them. We must do all we can to build up the leadership of the local church. At the end of the day, nothing will make a greater difference in the Apostolic Assembly like having strong local churches.

I am calling for all upper and middle management of the Apostolic Assembly to focus on the well-being of the local church. To put this in business terms, "the customer is the most important person and must be treated as such." The customer of the General and the District Boards is the local church. And the customer of the local church is its membership and the lost.

While casting the National vision to the Pastors of the South-Central District on how this administration plans on implementing the vision of the Strategy of Jesus, Pastor Sam Orozco remarked that what we are proposing was to invert the leadership triangle. I asked him to elaborate. He simply stated, "that what the General Board was proposing was to make the upper and middle management of the church to serve the basic unit of the Church, which is the local church." That rang true.

What I am proposing is that the health of the Apostolic Assembly be measured by the well-being of the Pastor and the local church. The metric for measuring the success of the General and District Boards must be the success of the Pastor and the local church. We must ask ourselves, "Are the local churches growing according to the vision statement? Are new works being intentionally planted? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the local church? Are churches retaining Apostolic doctrine and identity? What services or training can the General and District Boards provide to help you, the Pastor to be successful?"

I am proposing a shift in our thinking. I am proposing that the General and the District Boards bring the local church to the center of their thinking and planning. Whatever activities are planned outside of the local assembly must not be separated from the needs and realities of the local church. In fact, they must be laser-focused on them. No activities must be planned just for the sake of planning activities. In this new way of thinking, the local church moves to the top of the pyramid. The other levels (Sector, District, and National) work to support the local church leadership in its missional activities and training. No one

12. Hybels, Bill. *Courageous Leadership*. Zondervan, 2002,

can deny that, in significant ways, that has been happening for many years. The General Board goes to great lengths and has invested significant assets to provide resources and training for the local churches. Still, there seems to be a disconnect that needs to be resolved. An inversion of the leadership triangle will be a huge step in the right direction.

3. BUILD THE CHURCH: MISSION – THE HOLY SPIRIT.

In the Year 2024, the Apostolic Assembly will be focusing on the Holy Spirit. I understand from the Scriptures that the work of the Holy Spirit is fundamental to the mission of the church. After the resurrection, and after having given His disciples the Apostolic message and mission, He told them, “And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high.”¹³ Prior to engaging in the mission of preaching Christ, the disciples were to be filled with the Holy Ghost. The movement of the Holy Ghost was essential to reaping a bountiful harvest. Not only was the Holy Ghost poured out upon all believers, but at Pentecost, He did the greater work as Peter preached the message he had received from Jesus. I have read the message of the apostle Peter many times and have found it to be theologically sound and historically precise. What I have not found in his sermon is creativity, eloquence, or human charisma, which are the characteristics we admire today. So, how can we explain the astonishing results of three thousand souls being saved? The answer has to be the Holy Ghost. It was Peter who preached, but it was the Holy Ghost that convicted the people to hear the message, which brought them to repentance and the forgiveness of their sins. Acts chapter two describes a move of the Holy Ghost.

We need a renewal of the Spiritual Gifts in the Apostolic Assembly. I am asking the Bishops and Pastors of our churches to inform themselves about the workings of the Spiritual Gifts. We need to teach our people how to operate in the Gifts God has given them. The release of the Spiritual Gifts “locked” in the lives of their members is crucial to the movement of the Holy Ghost in our churches. The “locks” that keep the Gifts from manifesting are ignorance (I Corinthians 12:1). The “Keys” that release the Gifts are knowledge, knowledge of the Gifts, and their proper use. Knowledgeable Pastors hold the “keys” to unlocking those Gifts. We need a renewal of the Spiritual Gifts, and their proper exercise, in the Apostolic Assembly. Something beautiful happens when they function in order. The office of Pastor-Teacher (Ephesians 4:11) is critical to what God is about to do. That is where the order will come from. The next great Apostolic renewal and movement of the Holy Ghost is upon us. We are the **Pastors of the revival.**

I will end this message by challenging the leaders of the Apostolic Assembly to look to the future and believe God for what He has said is possible and to work in faith and see what God has promised to come to pass. As we lift up our eyes and behold the fields, we must pray to the Lord of the harvest for laborers. As we organize our churches to reap a harvest, we must understand that He alone can breathe life into the souls of men who are dead in their trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1-2) and depend on the Holy Ghost to do what He alone can do. Only then will we experience a harvest that will only be explained by saying,

13. Luke 24:49, KJV

“God did this.” It was the Prophet Zachariah who wrote, “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts.” ¹⁴

It is my desire that God bless the Pastors of our church and that God bless the Apostolic Assembly of the Faith in Christ Jesus. BUILD THE CHURCH: MISSION – The Holy Spirit.

In Christ,

Bishop Felipe A. Salazar
General Pastor, AAFCJ



BUILD THE CHURCH:
MISSION

MATTHEW 16:18